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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 002060

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: TEN YEARS

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS GOVERNMENT MINISTER GANDARA

Classified By: PolChief Erik Hall, for reason 1.4 (b&d).

11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador paid a courtesy call on Minister of Government Mauricio Gandara on September 1. Gandara, a lightning rod for growing criticism of the Palacio government, made light of the chorus of calls for his impeachment. In a cordial and wide-ranging discussion, Gandara blamed virtually all crime in Ecuador on Colombians, expounded on military theory, promoted his own views on political reform, and committed his ministry to fully apply the new law against trafficking in persons (TIP). The Ambassador differed with Gandara's analysis of the Colombian conflict and offered collaboration against TIP. Though rumors of his impending ouster are long-standing, we believe Gandara's days as minister might finally be drawing to a merciful end. End Summary.

12. (C) The Ambassador's call on Gandara was her first on a minister since presenting her credentials on August 29. (The Minister of Government position is first in protocol rank among Cabinet members here.) She was accompanied by the DCM and PolChief. Gandara was alone for most of the meeting, but called in Vice Minister Fernando Acosta when the discussion turned to TIP.

Colombia the Root of Ecuador's Problems

13. (C) Gandara, among the Cabinet's most virulent nationalists, opened with a rant against Colombia. "Virtually all modern crimes committed here involve Colombians," he said. Fully 55% of residents of Lago Agrio (site of the most violent demonstrations during the provincial strike in Sucumbios province) are of Colombian origin. There was definitely Colombian involvement in oil country strikes, although he was vague about what form that involvement took. A member of the prefect of Orellana's strike negotiating team was a Colombian missionary, he claimed.

14. (C) VM Acosta later offered a more reasoned analysis of recent provincial and local strike activity. The strikes in Manabi, Orellana and Sucumbios reflect the divide between provinces with a culture of local tax-raising (Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca, Loja, Manta) and those accustomed to depending only on central government handouts. This pattern exists even within provinces. Portoviejo, site of the first of the series of strikes, lies just 40 km from entrepreneurial (and strike-free) Manta.

15. (C) Burnishing his credentials as a military school grad, Gandara said the Colombian military should take fixed positions along the Ecuadorian border and push the FARC inward. His corollary was that the Colombia conflict is not winnable militarily. To do so would take an operational force advantage of 10-1, which the government does not have over the 40,000 guerrillas. Efforts to stem the flow of drugs had not raised the price of cocaine on the street in the U.S. The Ambassador expressed the USG view that the GOC is making steady progress recovering territory previously held by terrorist groups. "Yes, at our expense," he exclaimed.

Politics: My Way

16. (C) Gandara made light of ongoing impeachment attempts in Congress against him. "I check with my staff every morning how many new petitions came in over night." (Note: The Democratic Left (ID) party recently joined the fringe-leftist Popular Democracy Movement (MPD) in supporting a non-binding impeachment process in response to Gandara's handling of the recent strikes. The Social Christian party (PSC) is publicly considering doing the same, but for different reasons.)

17. (C) Turning to pending political reforms, Gandara said he had been against Vice President Serrano's public consultation process "from the start." The referendum should be moved forward to the end of September, to respond to peoples demands for change. What is most urgently needed, he said, is an immediate return to bicameralism, to create a check on unconstitutional moves by a single house of Congress. A reduction of Congress' time in session is also needed, to limit its capacity for damage. He added a final reform he plans to suggest to the president: a constitutional change to strip any striking government official of his/her official

responsibilities. If voted down by the people, he vowed to leave the government, joking that "the last one leaving turns out the lights."

Committed to Fighting TIP

18. (C) The Ambassador emphasized the importance of progress in the fight against TIP, with which Gandara agreed. Now that we have a new law to enforce, he said, "we must apply it fully." VM Acosta said the GOE was already applying the law in a landmark TIP case in Ambato; cited a recent Quito municipality initiative against child prostitution; lauded GOE internal coordination and help from the American Bar Association, including an impending airport poster campaign against sexual tourism; and said the First Lady's office will soon launch a nationwide anti-TIP public education campaign.

Comment

19. (C) The hyper-nationalist and sometimes prickly Gandara was clearly eager to impress and welcome the Ambassador. Boasting about his personal fitness, he even invited the Ambassador to join him on long walks up Pichincha volcano once she became accustomed to the altitude. However, events may intervene to thwart this invitation. Presidential sibling Gustavo Palacio told the DCM on September 1 that although he felt mounting criticism of Gandara was largely undeserved, he had recently recommended that his brother replace Gandara. We agree with brother Palacio's view that Gandara has become a liability.

JEWELL